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INVESTIGATIONS

How did 28 people die while skydiving near Lodi? Here's what we know happened

BY **STEPHEN HOBBS** AND **MICHAEL MCGOUGH**

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A skydiver prepares to land at the Parachute Center at the Lodi Airport in September.

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THE FINAL FALL



Newspaper clippings featuring tragedies from the Parachute Center skydiving facility at the Lodi Airport. Rachel Handley rhandley@mcclatchy.com

As part of [an investigation](#) into the Parachute Center near Lodi, The Sacramento Bee determined that at least 28 people have died while skydiving there since 1985. While the circumstances of each are unique, there are common throughlines.

Here are the details of what happened:

38 years, 28 deaths

The Sacramento Bee has identified at least 28 people who have died at the Parachute Center through county death investigations, federal incident reports and news accounts.

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1	Sabrina Call	Main-reserve entanglement	2021	57
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20	James Fullerton	Suspected suicide	1999	23
21	James O'Conner	Suspected suicide	1994	28

	NAME	DETAILS	YEAR	AGE
22	George Post	Equipment problem	1994	53
23	Albert Rodriguez	Apparent no pull	1994	58
24	Deven Whittaker	Main-reserve entanglement	1993	15
25	Darrin Hansen	Canopy collision	1990	25
26	William Russi Jr.	Main-reserve entanglement	1990	20
27	Kirk Braden	Apparent no pull	1989	28
28	Unknown	Equipment problem	1985	—

APRIL 17, 2021

The main and reserve parachutes for Sabrina Call, 57, tangled and both “down planed,” or pointed toward the ground, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation and FAA incident report. William Dause, the Parachute Center’s founder, said Call, who lived in Watsonville, had jumped about 2,000 times, according to a [Bee story](#) from the time.

SEPT. 26, 2019

Maria Robledo Vallejo, 28, was [attempting to land](#) when the wind apparently blew her parachute over Highway 99, which runs near the Parachute Center, where she was struck by a semi-truck, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation. The Colombia native had been living at the skydiving center for a couple of weeks prior.

OCT. 14, 2018

The main parachute for Nena Mason, 62, malfunctioned, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation. Mason was skydiving with her husband, who

said Mason was unable to deploy her backup parachute in time. Mason, who lived in Colorado, had jumped more than 2,500 times, the husband told an investigator.

SEPT. 14, 2017

[Brett Hawton](#), 54, was hospitalized after his parachute appeared to not have deployed correctly, according to an FAA incident report. Hawton was wearing a jumpsuit with webbing, called a wingsuit, the report said. The Alamo resident later died at a hospital.

MAY 24, 2017

[Matthew Ciano](#), 42, was jumping in a wingsuit, The Bee reported at the time. Dause said Ciano's parachute failed to deploy correctly and that he "waited too long to get rid of the bad parachute." Ciano, who was from June Lake, was an experienced skydiver and had used a wingsuit hundreds of times before, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation.

AUG. 6, 2016

Tyler Turner, 18, and instructor Yong Kwon, 25, were [on a tandem jump](#). During it, Kwon had issues with the main and reserve parachutes, according to an FAA incident report. Kwon, who was born in South Korea, had completed more than 670 jumps, according to the report and a San Joaquin County death investigation. Turner, who lived in Los Banos, was skydiving for the first time.

FEB. 13, 2016

Ramiro Sainz, 49, had trouble while deploying his main parachute, according to an FAA incident report. Sainz, from Concord, was recording other skydivers before he released the main chute, the report said. Witnesses said the parachute deployed but seemed to be out of control.

APRIL 29, 2014

Timothy Dutton, a 27-year-old professional skier and veteran skydiver, collided with another jumper, according to a Bee article at the time and an FAA incident report. The FAA report said Dutton hit his head on the other skydiver's leg, appeared to lose consciousness and did not deploy his main or backup parachutes.

APRIL 5, 2012

Witnesses said when William Calhoun III, 71, deployed his parachute, it appeared to do so fully. But the veteran jumper, from Novato, began to spiral out of control and he was unable to steady himself, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation. An FAA investigation found no evidence that Calhoun deployed his reserve parachute, the county's report said.

JUNE 17, 2010

Lieve DeMeyer, 25, became separated from her parachute equipment during free fall, according to an [FAA incident report](#). DeMeyer had completed more than 500 jumps, the report said. The Lodi News-Sentinel [reported](#) Meyer was from Belgium.

SEPT. 13, 2009

Parachutes used by Barbara Cuddy, 48, and Robert Bigley, 32, became entangled. The experienced skydivers were part of a group practicing a diamond-like formation in the air, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation. Their chutes deflated as they fell to the earth. Cuddy lived in Nevada and Bigley lived in Redwood City.

AUG. 21, 2004

Marvell Strawn, 31, crashed into another skydiver after having trouble opening his parachute, the Associated Press reported at the time. Strawn died at the scene, and the other skydiver was critically injured, the AP reported.

OCT. 4, 2003

Paul Cousins, 21, crashed onto Highway 99 while attempting a 270-degree turn, according to an FAA incident report and the North Shore News of Canada, where he was from. It was Cousins' 44th jump, the FAA said. He later died at a hospital, the North Shore News reported.

JUNE 24, 2001

Torsten Pohlschneider's parachute malfunctioned, according to an FAA incident report. The (Stockton) Record [reported](#) that Pohlschneider's parachute was automatically deployed by a line connected to a plane, but that it did not fully open. Dause was piloting the plane, the newspaper said.

Pohlschneider tried to use his reserve parachute, Dause said, but did so too late. The 27-year-old was a tourist from Germany, according to the News-Sentinel, and was attending a jump school at the center.

MAY 26, 2001

Daniel Skarry, a 52-year-old from Oakland, apparently lost consciousness while skydiving, The Bee reported at the time. The News-Sentinel [reported](#) Skarry suffered a heart attack during the jump.

MARCH 31, 2001

The main and reserve parachutes for [Janice Davis](#), 49, became entangled in a camera mounted on her helmet, according to an FAA incident report and a Bee story from the time. Davis had made more than 2,000 jumps, the FAA report said.

AUG. 19, 2000

Wind ripped Nicole Cadiz's harness off during free fall, The Bee reported at the time. Cadiz, 25, was an experienced jumper, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation.

OCT. 29, 1999

James Fullerton's main and reserve parachutes were not deployed during his 256th jump, according to an [FAA incident report](#). The 23-year-old man's death was ruled a suicide, according to a San Joaquin County death investigation.

SEPT. 16, 1994

George Post, 53, apparently had trouble with his main parachute and did not have time to deploy his reserve one. Post's brother told [The Record](#) that Dause had required Post to give up his own parachute and use Dause's gear. Dause told the paper he didn't allow Post to use his own parachute because it was old and archaic.

1994

Sometime in 1994 — The Bee could not verify a specific date — a 28-year-old Sacramento resident, James O'Conner, did not attempt to open either his main or reserve parachutes. [The Record](#) said the death was ruled a suicide and that the man had walked away from an inpatient psychiatric facility a few days before the jump.

1994

Sometime in 1994 — The Bee could not verify a specific date — Albert Rodriguez, 58 and of San Jose, died. Rodriguez had more than 600 jumps but apparently failed to pull either his main or reserve parachutes, according to [The Record](#).

APRIL 7, 1993

Deven Whittaker, 15, died after his main parachute deployed improperly and became entangled with a backup chute, according to an FAA incident report. Whittaker, who had made about 20 jumps, was skydiving with his mother, an experienced jumper, and was practicing maneuvers before he crashed, The Press-Tribune of Roseville reported at the time.

NOV. 24, 1990

Darrin Hansen, 25, collided with the parachute canopy of another person during a jump about 30 feet above the ground, according to an FAA incident report and the San Joaquin County Medical Examiner's Office.

AUG. 26, 1990

William Russi Jr., 20, experienced an issue after opening his main parachute, according to an FAA incident report. A story from The Bee at the time said Russi began to spin and apparently tried to deploy his reserve parachute, but it tangled with the main chute.

MARCH 11, 1989

Witnesses said Kirk Braden, 28, showed no action to deploy either one of his parachutes during a descent, according to an FAA incident report and the San Joaquin County Medical Examiner's Office.

JAN. 27, 1985

Witnesses did not see a skydiver attempt to open his reserve parachute after the main chute fouled, according to an FAA incident report. The Bee was not able to identify the jumper.

This story was originally published December 14, 2023, 5:00 AM.

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

How we reported these stories

Why did we report this story?

Following the \$40 million civil court ruling in March 2021 against William Dause and the Parachute Center's 28th reported death in April 2021, Sacramento Bee journalists endeavored to find out how the high-profile Northern California business has managed to stay open – with Dause still the public face of the operation while owing tens of millions of dollars to the family of a jumper who died there in 2016, at age 18.

How did we report this story?

Reporters Michael McGough and Stephen Hobbs spent months combing through court filings, depositions and a federal indictment; Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board records and citations; airplane registration databases; county business records; California business license and tax information; archived stories from multiple news publications spanning four decades; and anonymized data provided by the U.S. Parachute Center.

The reporting led to a complicated conclusion: while it is all but impossible – largely due to lax government oversight and loose recordkeeping practices within the industry – to determine whether the Parachute Center's 28 deaths represent a statistical outlier, it is clear Dause has continued to play an active role at the drop zone more than two years after a judge ruled him and the business responsible for an eight-figure sum.

As of the beginning of December 2023, Dause had not paid a cent to the Turner family, even as he flies planes for and works the front desk at the Parachute Center.

Who did we talk to?

The Bee sat down this year with Dause at the Parachute Center and victim Tyler Turner's mother Francine Turner at her Los Banos home, each for nearly two-hour interviews. Those interviews were focused on the deaths of Tyler and his tandem instructor Yong Kwon but also delved into the appeal of skydiving, a recreational activity that is adrenaline-pumping but inherently dangerous.

The Bee also interviewed a range of experts, stakeholders, skydivers, attorneys and government officials, as well as loved ones of victim Tyler, who died while trying to celebrate a friend's 18th birthday.

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